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All About Lily Chou-Chou

Shunji Iwai

JAPAN, 2001

146 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Production Company: **Rockwell Eyes Inc.**
 Producer: **Koko Maeda**
 Screenplay: **Shunji Iwai**
 Cinematographer: **Noboru Shinoda**
 Editor: **Yoshiharu Nakagami**
 Production Designer: **Noboru Ishida**
 Sound: **Osamu Takizawa**
 Music: **Takeshi Kobayashi**
 Principal Cast: **Hayato Ichihara,**
Shugo Oshinari, Aymi Ito

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Shunji Iwai, best known for his pitch-perfect, low-key romantic films *Love Letter* and *April Story*, has created something entirely fresh. *All About Lily Chou-Chou* is one of the most challenging, complex and brilliant cinematic experiences of the year.

As the movie begins, expansive and moody images feed an elliptical narrative, interrupted by frenetic typing on a black screen. The writers are devotees of Lily, a popular musician. We are on their broad band site called Lilyholic, and much of their discussion is focussed on the "ether," a term Lily uses to speak about the effect of music on a listener. They also discuss a terrible incident in Shibuya a few years back when the stabbing of a teenaged boy coincided with the disappearance of another fan site, Lily Philia.

Gradually we learn that the images we are seeing relay the story of this site's destruction and how the murder came to pass. But the film's lead characters are very different from the enthusiastic and articulate fans on the site; they are high school students, bitter and taciturn, and they act on any possible opportunity to torture one another, both psychologically and physically. Their personal histories are revealed and it becomes clear how the pressures of student life transformed them into monsters. But very little is explained in the end; we are left with an overwhelming sadness in the face of complete humiliation and isolation.

Described as such, *All About Lily Chou-Chou* sounds like a close relative to the other

powerful, nihilistic films this year about the state of Japanese youth – *Blue Spring*, *Harmful Insect* and *Battle Royale*. Though this film definitely has much in common with these others, the themes that Iwai is concerned with are actually much more disturbing. The Internet acts here as a kind of last beacon for human exchange and kindness. The creation of idols, a particularly intense and fraught process in Japan, is the seed of societal destruction. And finally, the undefinable power of music remains the only salvation for those left alienated by an uncaring world. *All About Lily Chou-Chou* is an intensely moving experience.

■ **Noah Cowan**

Shunji Iwai was born in 1963 in Sendai City, Japan. He began directing music videos and television dramas and was named the best new filmmaker by the Japanese Film Director's Association in 1993. His debut feature *Love Letter* (95) met with enormous popular and critical success. Other films include: *Picnic* (96), *Swallowtail* (96), *April Story* (98) and *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (01).

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